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William Colby's Vietnam

LOST VICTORY
A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam
By William Colby with James McCargar
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By Arnold R. Isaacs

ON INTO the 21st century, no doubt, former policymakers will still be churning out memoirs on how the United States could and should have won the Vietnam War.

William Colby was associated with the war longer than most, beginning when he was sent to Saigon in 1959 as the CIA's station chief. He remained involved with Vietnam in subsequent assignments as chief of the agency's Far East Division, head of the Vietnam pacification program and finally as CIA director, the post he held when the war ended in 1975. With that background, it's no surprise to find Colby joining the long list of former officials who have sought to explain in print how, if only their advice and pet programs had been adopted, U.S. policy could have succeeded. What is surprising, though, is how shallow, trite, muddled and unconvincing Colby's arguments are, and how little new information he contributes to the debate.

To begin with, *Lost Victory*, Colby's memoir of his Vietnam experiences, has almost nothing significant to say about the CIA's role in forming or carrying out U.S. policies during the war—surely a topic about which much remains to be learned.

Instead, Colby has written a lengthy polemic claiming that victory was won in Vietnam, mainly due to the pacification program he headed in 1968-71, but was squandered by the U.S. failure to provide adequate levels of military aid after American forces left, under a failed ceasefire agreement, in early 1973.

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FROM "LOST VICTORY"

William Colby (center) with the Rural Development Cadre Team in Delta province, 1968

To make this case, Colby gives a version of events so full of omissions and distortions that even those on his own side of the continuing Vietnam debate may find this book unpersuasive and embarrassing. In substance and in style, *Lost Victory* more closely resembles a book-length compilation of old government press releases than a serious attempt to explain the long and frustrating American experience in Vietnam.

Consider, for example, Colby's categorical assertion that "on the ground in South Vietnam, the war had been won" by mid-1972, after several years of pacification successes and after Saigon's forces withstood a major North Vietnamese offensive in the spring of that year.

On this point, as on many others, Colby leaves out necessary, if inconvenient, facts. The South Vietnamese achieved a defensive victory in 1972, certainly, in the sense that their army and regime survived the offensive and (with the help of heavy U.S. bombing) successfully recaptured one and defended two others of the three province capitals that were the main targets of the communist attack. At the same time, though, most of their scattered bases in the mountainous hinterland were permanently lost, leaving the communists more strongly entrenched than ever in their traditional base areas. South Vietnamese casualties, meanwhile, were so high that some divisions, including several of the best ones, had still not recovered in morale or combat efficiency by the time of the next and final communist offensive in 1975. The unprecedented 1972 losses (nearly twice as high as in any previous year of the war) and the widespread devastation also permanently depressed civilian morale.

If that was a victory for Saigon in any sense, it was clearly not a decisive one, despite Colby's claim. A more honest assessment would be that the bloody 1972 fighting

only restored the old stalemate at a higher level of violence, in which South Vietnam's national will and fragile institutions weakened at an accelerating rate over the next 2½ years.

There are too many other cases of selective or outright false history in this account to be covered in a brief review, but one more, at least, deserves mention: Colby's treatment of the Saigon evacuation in 1975 and the fate of the CIA station's Vietnamese employees who were left behind in the collapsing South Vietnamese capital.

With deliberate fuzziness, Colby refers to "charges that many individuals who should have been helped to depart were abandoned and that sensitive material was left behind to compromise those who had worked with the CIA and other American agencies."

Nowhere, however, does he mention—or answer—the *specific* allegations made by former CIA officer Frank Snepp in his 1977 book, *Decent Interval*, that in the confusion of the war's last hours, the agency left 70 of its Vietnamese translators and their families behind in one CIA compound, while also failing to evacuate 100 or so other Vietnamese with agency connections who were awaiting evacuation in another CIA building just a few blocks from the U.S. embassy.

About this Colby only says vaguely that "many who should have been helped to depart were not, but many others were," and then goes on to declare that the "true test" was that 130,000 Vietnamese escaped from their country at the end of the war—as if that offset the CIA's failure to rescue its own employees!

It's hard not to feel that on this matter, Colby has crossed the line from selective reporting and dubious logic to plain dishonesty. His silence on Snepp's account can only be taken as confirming it (surely he would have denied the story if he could) and in a manner that symbolically repeats the betrayal: After being written off in a bungled evacuation 14 years ago, those several hundred CIA employees and their dependents have now been written out of history itself by the very man they worked for.

UNDERLYING these and other specific misrepresentations is a more general fallacy running through the entire book: an almost completely misleading picture of America's partners, the South Vietnamese.

Colby's account shows no awareness at all of the Saigon leadership's ineptness, its corruption and—perhaps most damaging of all—the crippling passivity that left South Vietnam's generals unable to imagine, let alone carry out, any Vietnamese strategy against their Communist enemy.

Colby actually identifies this issue early in the book, when he quotes Ngo Dinh Nhu, the brother and principal adviser of South Vietnam's first president, Ngo Dinh Diem, as saying that the republic "needed to discover and develop a new political identity" to compete with the Communists' message of nationalism and social justice. (Nhu, pictured by most writers as a sinister schemer, is treated somewhat more kindly here; the different sense of his character and role is one of the few new impressions in Colby's book.)

Having approvingly cited Nhu's point, however, Colby goes through the rest of the book without acknowledging that the goal of a new, authentic South Vietnamese identity was never reached. The anti-communist side never achieved a spirit of dedication or common sacrifice matching that of the communists, nor did South Vietnam's leaders or public ever believe that they controlled their own destiny.

In failing to discuss these issues, Colby consequently also fails to consider a question that continues to have considerable relevance to U.S. policies today: If an American ally lacks will and competent, effective leadership, can U.S. aid or advice help develop those qualities? Or should Washington, in such cases, avoid commitment in the first place?

Along with such major distortions, *Lost Victory* also contains numerous minor errors of fact. Vu Van Mau was the prime minister, not the foreign minister, in South Vietnam's last government; Xuan Loc is east of Saigon, not north; Popular Forces militia units were organized and commanded at district level, roughly equivalent to a county, not in villages.

In his introductory chapter, Colby claims that through his long involvement he came to see the U.S. effort "through Vietnamese as well as American eyes." *Lost Victory* suggests instead a vision so narrow and so distorted that it screens out all the troubling truths of the war. What it tells us is not about a mythical victory we were too irresolute to keep, but how blind America's leadership really was, and how costly such blindness can be. ■